



Interview With Wolf Blitzer of CNN

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

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QUESTION: Joining us now at the State Department, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Madame Secretary, thanks very much.

SECRETARY RICE: Good to be with you.

QUESTION: You've got your hands full, a crisis with North Korea. You've been in office now for almost six years, six years to do something about Kim Jong-il. It looks like it's a total failure.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, first of all, Wolf, the North Koreans started pursuing nuclear weapons decades ago. And the fact of the matter is that the international community has finally come together in a way that brings China to the table, brings South Korea to the table, brings all of the stakeholders to the table in a way that if we get an agreement with the North Koreans to dismantle their nuclear weapons systems, it actually has a chance to last. We've been through bilateral talks with the North Koreans in the 1994 agreed framework. It didn't hold.

QUESTION: That was a mistake the Clinton Administration --

SECRETARY RICE: I will not blame anyone for trying. I just know that the 1994 agreement, of course, didn't hold. The North Koreans cheated.

QUESTION: Is there any evidence that what the Clinton Administration did help North Korea build these bombs?

SECRETARY RICE: Oh, I think North Korea has been persistent and has been consistent in pursuing this nuclear weapons program for decades. Now it's going to have to be stopped, and the international community is speaking with one voice very loudly because the North Koreans crossed an important line when they proclaimed that they had conducted a nuclear test.

QUESTION: Did they conduct a nuclear test?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we're still trying to evaluate what really happened here. And I think it will take a little while to evaluate it. But we have to take the claim seriously because it's a political claim if nothing else that tries to get the bargaining position of being a nuclear power.

QUESTION: So let me get it straight. The reason for six years almost that the Bush Administration has been unable to reverse North Korea's movement toward a bomb, developing more bombs, the main reason is because all of the parties involved were not on the same page?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I think, Wolf, it's very clear that no one's been able to reverse this program over decades. But we have a better chance now with China, which has leverage with North Korea, with South Korea, which has a relationship with North Korea, than doing this with the United States. I've heard people say that we should take this on bilaterally. Well, we did take it on bilaterally once with the North Koreans and it didn't work. They cheated on that agreement.

QUESTION: Were they cheating all through the Clinton Administration even after they promised that they would go forward and end their weapons program?

SECRETARY RICE: I think it's very obvious that they were pursuing another path to a nuclear weapon, so called highly enriched uranium path. But the important thing here is that we now have an opportunity with the international community speaking with one voice to bring world pressure on the North Koreans to make a different choice than they have made over this decade.

QUESTION: Because it looks like, if you're Kim Jong-il or Mahmud Ahmadi-Nejad for that matter, the leader of Iran, the only real guarantee you have that the United States or other countries are not going to overthrow you or invade you or do to them what the U.S. and its coalition partners did to Saddam Hussein is a nuclear weapon.

SECRETARY RICE: Oh, Wolf, I think we shouldn't even allow them such an excuse.

QUESTION: That's what they believe.

SECRETARY RICE: And let's be very clear, Iraq was *suigeneris*. Iraq had been under 12 years of sanctions for its weapons program. It was at the conclusion of a war that Iraq had launched against its neighbors. That was a very special situation. The President has said and, in fact, the joint statement which we signed with the other parties, the six parties, on September 19th of last year tells the North Koreans that there is no intention to invade or attack them. So they have that guarantee.

QUESTION: They don't believe it though.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I don't know what more they want. The United States of America doesn't have any intention to attack North Korea or to invade North Korea.

QUESTION: So the military option is not really --

SECRETARY RICE: The President never takes any of his options off the table. But is the United States somehow in a provocative way trying to invade North Korea? It's just not the case.

QUESTION: Here is what your top negotiator on North Korea, Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill, said to me yesterday in the Situation Room. He said, "Well, Kim Jong-il can feel whatever he wants and I'm sure he has some advisors who help him feel that he's in charge there, but I'm telling you he is going to really rue the day that he made this decision," the decision to go and test a nuclear bomb.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, he has clearly gotten the attention of everybody in this -- I've never seen universal condemnation of the kind that North Korea is now facing, and condemnation, by the way, not just from the United States and Europe and Japan, but from its closest supporters, those who are the ones who give them assistance.

QUESTION: So what does that mean, he's going to rue the day?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, because this already isolated regime, I think is going to find itself even more isolated and ultimately the regime itself has things that it wants from the international system.

QUESTION: Here's a question we asked our viewers to write in to cnn.com. Brian Kellogg from Arlington, Virginia, had this question he wanted to ask you. "It seems now is the time to consider launching preemptive strikes against North Korea. Didn't the President say he would not tolerate a nuclear North?"

We did check and back in May 2003 the President said this flatly, three years ago plus: "We will not tolerate nuclear weapons in North Korea. We will not give into blackmail. We will not settle for anything less than the complete, verifiable and irreversible elimination of North Korea's nuclear weapons program." Three years later, they've done all that and they're not paying much of a price yet.

SECRETARY RICE: Wolf, we don't have to settle for a nuclear North Korea. Most importantly, the United States is not alone in not settling for that nuclear North Korea. The United States is joined by China, which has very deep relations with North Korea and has criticized North Korea very strongly this time, with Russia, with Japan and with South Korea, on whom North Korea is very much dependent for interchange and for economic assistance.

So this coalition of states that is determined not to have a nuclear Korean Peninsula is going to act in a way that gives the North Koreans every reason to go back to negotiations and to verify the dismantling --

QUESTION: You know that CNN, CNN International, we're seen all over the world. If you can make a statement to Kim Jong-il right now, rue the day, whatever you want to say, go ahead and tell Kim Jong-il what he must do right now.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, Kim Jong-il doesn't need to hear from me. He needs to hear from the parties to the six-party talks and we're all saying the same thing.

QUESTION: He wants to hear it directly from you. He's not interested in the six-party talks.

SECRETARY RICE: I have a --

QUESTION: He wants a bilateral U.S.-North Korea dialogue.

SECRETARY RICE: He wants -- if he wants a bilateral deal, it's because he doesn't want to face the pressure of other states that have leverage. It's not because he wants a bilateral deal with the United States. He doesn't want to face the leverage of China or South Korea or others.

What Kim Jong-il should understand is that if he verifiably gives up his nuclear weapons program, there is a better path. There's a better path through negotiation. There's a better path to an opening to the international system. There's a better path for his people, who are oppressed and downtrodden, and hungry for that matter.

QUESTION: One of your predecessors, James Baker III, former Secretary of State, during the first Bush Administration said this on Sunday. He said, "I don't think you restrict your conversations to your friends. At the same time, it's got to be hard-nosed, it's got to be determined. You don't give away anything. But in my view, it is not appeasement to talk to your enemies." What's wrong with that line of thinking?

SECRETARY RICE: Wolf, has anybody noticed that we've actually talked to the North Koreans?

QUESTION: But they want to do it separately, not within the framework of this multiparty negotiation.

SECRETARY RICE: Let's ask the question why do they want to do it separately and not within the framework --

QUESTION: They want respect, they said.

SECRETARY RICE: They get respect when they come to the six-party talks. And Chris Hill has had dinner with the North Korean negotiator.

QUESTION: If it potentially could turn things around and end this nuclear North Korea, what's wrong with a direct dialogue like that?

SECRETARY RICE: Let me just remind you we tried direct dialogue. The United States tried direct dialogue with the North Koreans in the '90s. And that resulted in the North Koreans signing onto agreements that they then didn't keep. And the United States didn't have the force of others, like China and South Korea, to say to the North Koreans that is an agreement that you should have kept.

QUESTION: So Bill Clinton is to blame?

SECRETARY RICE: No, Wolf, you keep saying that and I've told you that at the time it might have made perfectly good sense to try direct talks. But having seen what North Korea did in that context, it's important not to go back down that road. It's important to bring the weight of China and South Korea and Japan and Russia to bear on the North Korean -- their nuclear ambitions.

QUESTION: They're not backing down, these North Koreans. Even today a North Korean official said this: "We hope the situation will be resolved before an unfortunate incident of us firing a nuclear missile comes. That depends on how the U.S. will act."

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I think the North Koreans know that firing a nuclear missile, shall we say, would not be good for North Korean security.

QUESTION: They've heard that. For years they've been hearing that and they're still moving forward.

SECRETARY RICE: The North Koreans are not confused about what it would mean to launch a nuclear attack against the United States, one of our allies or somebody in the neighborhood. They're not confused about that. What they're doing is that they are pursuing a nuclear program. They've been doing it for decades. They will face now international condemnation and international sanctions unlike anything that they have faced before.

And I just want to be very clear. The diplomatic path is open. The path back to the six-party talks where we actually had an agreement on September 19th that verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula would lead to all kinds of benefits for North Korea. So there is a deal on the table and if North Korea wishes to change its ways and return to that deal it's always there.

QUESTION: So spell out briefly the carrot that you're offering North Korea right now in terms of U.S. assistance, financial assistance, economic assistance, building light-water reactors. What is the carrot to them?

SECRETARY RICE: There is a six-party agreement as of September 19th of 2005. That agreement says that when there is verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, meaning the North Koreans begin to dismantle their programs, you can move all the way even to normalization of relations, assistance, help with North Korean energy problems. There is a long list of potential benefits to the North Koreans. But the North Koreans need to understand that that is going to come in the context of work among the neighbors, work among those states that have enough leverage to make sure that if the North Koreans sign on to an agreement this time, that they're actually going to live up to it.

QUESTION: I raise the questions about the supposed mistakes of the Clinton Administration today because Senator John McCain was very tough today. He came out and blasted the Clinton Administration for the missteps in dealing with North Korea in '93 and '94. Among other things, he said this to his colleague from New York State: "I would remind Senator Clinton and other Democrats critical of the Bush Administration's policies that the framework agreement her husband's administration negotiated was a failure. The Koreans received millions and millions in energy assistance. They diverted millions of dollars of food and assistance to their military." Do you agree with Senator McCain?

SECRETARY RICE: There is no doubt that the North Koreans used the cover of the framework agreement to pursue a different path to a nuclear weapon through highly enriched uranium. There's no doubt that they did divert assistance. There is no doubt also that they got millions of dollars in assistance. But I don't want to get into the game of whether or not that was a mistake. We did sign the agreed framework. We went forward with it. We went forward with it on a bilateral basis. The United States and North Korea, yes, there was some multilateral elements to pursuing the fuel through a consortium of states, but it was essentially bilateral, the United States and North Korea. And when they cheated, we had no one to stand with us and say to the North Koreans, you've cheated and that's a problem not just for the United States, but for China and for Japan and for Russia and South Korea. That's the difference in what President Bush has built.

QUESTION: No one is watching this more closely than the leaders in Iran who are supposedly moving towards their own nuclear weapons program, the supreme leader of Iran saying today and reacting to what's going on in North Korea, that Iran will continue its nuclear program without fear and without retreat.

SECRETARY RICE: Yes.

QUESTION: What's your message to the leadership of Iran?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, the Iranians also said that they condemn the North Korean program, so I assume they don't want to end up in the same position that the North Koreans are about to end up in the Security Council. The message to the Iranians is that they do have a path to a civil nuclear program. That's not the issue. When they say that the United States and the allies are trying to deny them civil nuclear energy, that's simply not right. This is about whether they can have enrichment and reprocessing capability which is the technology that allows you to make a bomb.

There is a very favorable package on the table for Iran put forward again by six countries, six interested and important countries and an offer for the United States to join negotiations, to talk about the Iranian nuclear ambitions for a civil nuclear program and anything else that the Iranians want to talk about. The condition set not by the United States, but by the IAEA Board of Governors is that they have to suspend their enrichment first.

QUESTION: You know --

SECRETARY RICE: I would hope the Iranians would still take that path, but we are in the Security Council concerning the Iran file and we're going to have a Security Council resolution under Chapter 7, Article 41.

QUESTION: You know a lot of analysts believe the U.S. has been weakened in dealing with North Korea and Iran by its involvement in Iraq.

SECRETARY RICE: I just don't understand this argument. The United States is quite capable of taking care of several problems simultaneously. Iraq was a desire to finally deal with a threat that had been there for too long, too many Security Council resolutions violated, too many unanswered questions about his weapons of mass destruction program, too much ambition to dominate the region, too many wars launched by this dictator, too much harshness against his own people, including mass graves. It was time to deal with Saddam Hussein.

QUESTION: I'll leave -- we're out of time, but I'll leave you with one e-mail we got from Scott Vanderbosch in Minnesota. He lost a son in Iraq. He said -- he wrote to us this, he said: "My son Jake died in Iraq on October 3, 2005. When will you finally admit that you were wrong going to Iraq and pull out? Why not try to save some American lives?"

SECRETARY RICE: Wolf, nobody can ever make up for the personal sacrifice of a father, of his son. And all you can do is to mourn that sacrifice. We also know that nothing of value is ever won without sacrifice. So the United States has had to throughout its history and especially through its postwar history, to sacrifice when peace and security and indeed freedom were on the line. Iraq was a threat. In the post-September 11th environment, it was a threat that needed to be dealt with. Yes, it's extremely difficult helping a country come to a democratic future that has never had that experience. But an Iraq that is secure, an Iraq that is democratic, an Iraq that is able to solve its problems through politics will be a centerpiece of a different kind of Middle East.

QUESTION: And Senator Warner says: You have two, three months to get this right; otherwise you got to rethink the whole strategy.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I said to the Iraqi leadership when I was there that the Iraqi people are going to run out of patience with them if they don't solve their problems. They need to put their political differences aside. They need to get the national compact in place. They need to build their security forces and Iraqis need to stop killing Iraqis. I found that the Iraqi Government fully understood its responsibilities. It's our responsibility to try and help them because an Iraq that is stable is going to be -- bring greater security to the United States, an Iraq that remains a place in which terrorists can operate and that is violent is going to be a security problem for the United States.

QUESTION: I know you spoke to the first President Bush because he was on Larry King after the Bob Woodward book came out. And he had a conversation with you, denying that -- what Woodward quoted him as saying: "Condi is a disappointment, isn't she? She's not up to the job." How did that conversation go?

SECRETARY RICE: Yeah, I just don't believe it. I know President Bush 41, President George H.W.

QUESTION: You worked for him.

SECRETARY RICE: I worked for him. I've known him for years. I just don't believe it. And sometimes people say things in books, sometimes people report rumor. But I know President George H.W. Bush and I don't believe it and he says it isn't true and I believe him.

QUESTION: You've got your hands full, Madame Secretary. Thanks very much for spending a few moments with us.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you very much.

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